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EAST INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO BRITISH COLUMBIA AND THE PACIFIC COAST STATES

The immigration of East Indian laborers to British Columbia and to our three Pacific Coast states has presented the most recent problem of Asiatic immigration. The Canadian government has solved it by a series of measures resulting in the effective exclusion of East Indian laborers from Dominion territory, and the Immigration Commission of the United States, which recently completed its work, recommends exclusion.¹

The number of East Indians immigrating to Canada during 1905 was 48; 1906, 387; nine months in 1907, 2,124; 1908, 2,623. These immigrants found employment chiefly as unskilled laborers on the railways, in lumber and shingle mills, and in the fishing industry. Because of their strange appearance, peculiar habits, and employment at relatively low wages, much opposition was shown to them as well as to the Chinese and Japanese. An investigation by the Canadian government resulted in the restriction to which reference has been made.

The investigation by the Deputy Minister of Labour showed that most of the immigration had been induced by the activity of certain steamship companies and their agents, by the distribution of literature throughout some of the rural districts of India from which most of the laborers came, exaggerating the opportunities of fortune-making in the province of British Columbia, and by the representations of a few individuals in British Columbia who had

¹ A brief account of the Canadian situation is found in a *Report by W. L. Mackenzie King, Deputy Minister of Labour on Mission to England to Confer with the British Authorities on the Subject of Immigration to Canada from the Orient and Immigration from India in Particular* (Ottawa, 1908, pp. 10). Reference is made in this report only to such phases of the subject as seem deserving of explicit mention, and to the results arrived at; the representations and views of the authorities of Great Britain and Canada respectively, together with an account of the negotiations between them, were set forth in a confidential memorandum accompanying this brief report. The various phases of the problem in the Pacific Coast states are presented in the reports submitted to Congress by the Immigration Commission. The data collected have been brought together in a special report on East Indians on the Pacific Coast, published in Volume XIX of these reports, while a summary statement is presented in the Abstracts of Reports recently printed.

induced a number of the natives of India to come to Canada under actual or verbal agreements to work for hire. Many of these laborers suffered greatly because of the opposition to them, the severity of the northern climate, and the unsuitability of the employment they were able to secure. To prevent these hardships, to avoid race friction with its complications, and to protect the white workingmen whose standard of comfort was of a higher order, and who, as citizens with family and civic obligations, had expenditures to meet and a status to maintain which the coolie immigrant was in a position wholly to ignore, the Canadian government sought a conference with the representatives of the parent government upon whose coöperation it was dependent in meeting this problem.

As a result of the conferences held in England in the spring of 1908, the Indian government undertook to disabuse the minds of its subjects of the false impressions spread by literature distributed by interested parties, and the steamship companies were given to understand that their activity was regarded with disfavor. Positive measures moreover were adopted which resulted in the practical exclusion of Indian laborers from Canada. The most formidable of these measures was the application to Hindu immigrants of section 38 of the Immigration Act, which provides that any immigrants who have come to Canada otherwise than by continuous journey from the country of which they are natives or citizens, and upon through tickets purchased in that country, may be excluded. As there is no means by which a continuous journey from India to Canada can be accomplished, the measure is effective. Moreover, by an order in council, dated June 3, 1908, the amount of money in possession required in the case of East Indian laborers upon landing was increased from \$25 to \$200. These measures have served their purpose; the number of such immigrants in 1908 was 2,626; in 1909, it was only six, and during the first five months of 1910, but one.

The immigration of East Indian laborers to the Pacific Coast states has been closely connected with their immigration to British Columbia. Until their immigration to Canada was restricted, nearly all of those entering the United States came from there in search of a less rigorous climate, more congenial employment, and the higher wages to be earned on this side of the border. More recently, however, the great majority have come directly to San Francisco. In 1906 the number of "immigrants" and "non-immi-

grants" arriving in the continental United States was 271; in 1907, 1,072; in 1908, 1,710. In 1908 the immigration officers began to turn back many lest they should become public charges, with the result that in 1909 the number of "immigrants" was only 337. During the fiscal year 1909-1910, however, with the more favorable treatment at the port of San Francisco, the number increased again to 1,782. Since July, 1910, with a change of policy at the port of San Francisco, the number admitted has been small. That either a large percentage of those who apply for admission are unfit, or that the interpretation of the law has been severe is shown by the fact that while 4,901 were admitted during the four years ending June 30, 1910, 1,597 were rejected, in spite of the fact that a large percentage of the applicants came from Canada, and that many were not permitted to sail from Asiatic ports. The numerous rejections have worked much hardship.

The investigations of the Immigration Commission indicate that about 85 per cent of the East Indian laborers have belonged to the agricultural class in their native land, and therefore have come equipped to do unskilled labor only. With very rare exceptions, they have engaged in the roughest, most unskilled work, and almost exclusively outside of factory walls where close association with others is unnecessary. Their employment, with few exceptions, has been limited to "yard work" in the lumber mills, to work as section hands and railroad construction laborers, as hand laborers in the sugar-beet fields in California, in grape and fruit picking, to weeding, hoeing, and wood chopping. They have also been employed about a pottery and a quarry near San Francisco, and in a rope factory at Portland, Oregon. A few have vended peanuts while several small groups have manufactured tamales and sold them in Oakland and San Francisco.

The industrial position of the East Indians is less secure than that of any other race in the West. They have found it more and more difficult to secure employment on the railways. Most of them have disappeared from the lumber mills of the Northwest where they were paid more than the Japanese but less than other common laborers. In July, 1910, the great majority of the 5,000 in the western states were in California, where the climate is most suitable and where they are employed chiefly as temporary ranch laborers to make good a deficiency in the labor supply, or to weaken the position of the Japanese in the labor market. They are usually paid the lowest day wage, do the least work, require the greatest

amount of supervision of all the races employed, and find little favor with ranchers.

The East Indians have come without their families, expecting to accumulate a small sum of money and then to return to their native land with the strain of poverty removed. Indeed, most of them have sent their earnings home as soon as received, and in numerous instances have failed to retain enough to tide them over periods of unemployment which occur often and sometimes extend over several weeks. Living apart from all other races, their privations in some instances have been great.

About 85 per cent of the East Indians in the West are the tur-banned Hindus, 15 per cent Mohammedans and Afghans. They seek employment in groups of varying numbers and, when engaged in agricultural work, live and cook in the open or in such outbuildings and "shacks" as may be assigned for their use. Needless to say, the cost of living is small. In the cities, however, they occupy basements or other poor quarters, and their expenses are somewhat larger. Their total outlay is smaller than that of male groups of other races, but the difference is not great if comparison is limited to those engaged in the same kind of work.

Tabu in the selection and preparation of food, and caste in their associations are conspicuous facts among the East Indian laborers. Frequently a half-dozen "messes" or eating groups will be found among the members of one "gang". Yet caste and custom are losing ground and have less influence here than in India. With regard to the percentage of illiterates, the investigations of the Immigration Commission indicate that it is greater than for any other race immigrating to this country. In fact, between one half and three fifths of them cannot read and write.

Thus the East Indians do not occupy an important place in the labor supply of the West, their efficiency is low, their employment irregular, their competitive ability small, and their industrial position insecure. Their assimilative qualities are lower than those of any other race in the West. The strong influence of custom, caste, and tabu, as well as their religion, dark skins, filthy appearance, dress and mode of life have stood in the way of association with other races, and it is evident from the attitude of others that they will be given no opportunity to assimilate. It is certain that until many changes have been wrought the East Indians of the laboring class will find no place in American life save in the exploitation of our resources. The Immigration Commission there-

fore has made the recommendation that “an understanding should be reached with the British Government whereby East Indian laborers would be effectively prevented from coming to the United States.” In asking for an agreement of this kind, our government would merely request the British Government to do for the United States what it has done for one of its own dependencies.

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